

The Destruction of Architecture: German Cities in Literature during and after World War II

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Abstract

The Allied bombing campaigns over the German cities during World War II produced a vast landscape of destruction, which has been the object of reports, accounts and fictional narratives. Cities and buildings, a fundamental architectural heritage binding individuals and communities to their existential spaces, were annihilated in the most extensive act of deliberate destruction in human history. In this article, I look into the work of three authors – Heinrich Böll, Stig Dagerman and Hans Erich Nossack – to outline the effects of the bombings on the survivors, and on their relationship to both urban space and architectural heritage.

Keywords

World War II, bombings, literary descriptions, architectural heritage, atmospheres

Cities are more than just architecture, and historic centres more than just sites of heritage. While urbanisation has been variously considered as the source of anxiety and psychosis, it is nevertheless true that the bond between cities and human practices embodies the constituent bedrock of culture.¹ As Dalibor Vesely observes, the articulation of culture emerges from the unfolding relations between places and activities, from the daily going about of urban subjects within the material constitution of architecture.² The sedimentation over time of such traces in the urban environment turns the physical scaffolding of the city into a dense and meaningful space, enabling us to experience it with confidence and stability. We may indeed consider this connection as a possible understanding of heritage: a sedimented array of relationships between subjects, movements, and things, which allows us to maintain our posture in the world without losing our bearings.

Heritage is a notion that has changed over time, progressively shifting from normative definitions descending from materialist, taxonomic art histories, to a more performative understanding that focuses on the relations between people and their traditional living environments. The Faro Convention established a political charter to understand our relation to the traces of the past and how to go about preserving them for future generations.³ Nevertheless, we must observe that its definition primarily appeals to a sphere of cognition that is bound to knowledge and an 'officially established' reference framework, such as that provided by conservation authorities. Beyond this, I would like to argue that heritage may not only be about what I know that relates to the world that surrounds me: heritage is also something that I feel, and that makes me feel in a certain way.

In this sense, heritage enters the scene of the affective world. We are not considering the case of the lofty monument, the celebrated archaeological site or the venerated

cathedral: heritage is something that speaks to individuals and communities, even when its artistic or cultural relevance may be limited. Heritage emerges as such when it tells the story of my culture and defines my identity, when it makes me feel proud and at home, when it appeases a sense of longing.⁴ While this may be a broad and inclusive definition, expanding the boundaries of what we consider heritage beyond what would be included in tourist guides, it also establishes a clear principle: that heritage is not a matter of beautiful things, but of a human condition that makes us bond to environments beyond their artistic appreciation, prompting us to protect what we consider worthy and precious.

Yet, we know, heritage is sometimes lost. Cities get destroyed: by natural events, by wars. They can also be radically transformed by subtle and corrosive forces that apparently bear no violence but prove destructive nonetheless. A damaged city may lose its material articulation of architecture, along with its web of practices, relations, traditions, values, and the entire range of human dynamics that has coevolved with its physical growth. Under these conditions, urban spaces are no longer capable of harbouring that sense of confidence and stability that its inhabitants are accustomed to. To sound the deeper strata of existence, it is necessary to turn to more subtle and sophisticated tools, more apt at expressing the nuanced, the unspeakable – all that may otherwise be lost. Literature, as a practice of describing reality, can reach to this magmatic cache of sensations, bringing them to light.

Ever since Carthage was razed to the ground by the Roman soldiers in an attempt to make even the memory of the city disappear from history, 'urbicide' has represented an extreme wartime practice, designed to destroy much more than just the physical portion of urbanisation.⁵ The rationale and manifestations of these deliberately inflicted disasters, including the dialectics of destruction and reconstruction, form a field of investigation embracing a broad range of case studies.⁶ In this occasion, I will focus on one of the most terrifying events of this kind: the destruction of German cities during and immediately after World War II. The largest campaign of destruction ever conceived in human history, its aftermath and its literary descriptions offer an occasion to observe and discuss how architectures of cultural heritage become part of a narration, of a shared cultural memory. My primary intention is to focus on the embodied and affective cues that the literary accounts provide us: not merely the material description of things, nor the visual narrative available through the vast photographic documentation of the war events, but its resonance as mirrored in the attitudes, gestures, postures, practices and thought of those who were affected by the tremendous destruction.

The Virgil to this journey, quite predictably, will be W.G. Sebald. While he was not a direct witness of the war's destruction, his seminal 1999 essay *On the Natural History of Destruction*, established a new literary paradigm.⁷ As a second-order account, it reviewed the paucity of reports of bellic destruction available in post-war German literature, thus identifying a 'black hole' of avoidance, of missing personal histories.⁸ Sebald's meticulous, at times horrific reconstruction of the bombing techniques developed by the Allies to raze German cities to the ground makes him imagine what the storm of fire might have actually looked like for those who were there.

Although Sebald's considerations were not universally accepted, and several critics claimed that there was no such process of denial, it is evident that the destructions displaced the lived experiences to a field of hardly fathomable, unsayable depth.⁹ I will attempt to identify the 'symptoms' of this trauma as they are indirectly manifested, for example in the expressions of affect, of corporeal dynamics, and in the atmospheres captured by the literary accounts. This description encompasses a twofold register: first, the observation of how the spatial settings sustain the narratives. The broken architectures and fragmented cities, as well as the landscape, which is itself shaken by the bombings, all contribute to the construction of a certain *Stimmung*. Second, I will consider the literary techniques adopted by the writers: among these, we find carefully crafted narratives that lead to a gradual unfolding of awareness, and the ensuing emotional emergence; others attempt to remove any subjective filter, describing the sequence of events in their sheer factuality. Yet what appears as a common note among all authors is that the spaces and the human subjects that inhabit them are never disjointed, and that describing one inevitably implies the foregrounding of the other. In analysing the description of spaces, events and subjects, my goal will be to identify which features of the texts make the architectural heritage and its inhabitants come to life before our eyes.

Three authors who are subjected to Sebald's scrutiny will provide tokens of descriptions of the cities during and after the war: Heinrich Böll, the acclaimed father of *Trümmerliteratur* ('rubble literature'), whose short stories reflected on the existential conditions of soldiers returning from the front to find their hometowns destroyed; Stig Dagerman, the young Swedish reporter who travelled to Germany in the autumn of 1946 to publish his accounts in the newspaper *Expressen*, and Hans Erich Nossack, whose 1948 essay *The End* offers an astonishing account of the destruction of Hamburg.¹⁰ Through each of them, we will observe a specific instance of how the destruction and loss of heritage deprives the inhabitants of stability: by severing the continuity of spatial experience, leading

to fragmentation; by prompting a response of indifference towards the harsh conditions the ruined cities now afford; and by making the inhabitants lose their bearing, their ability to use urban space as a tool to find one's standing in the world. While the syntheses of the authors' works cannot substitute the original texts, they will help to build and sustain an argument, outlining the crucial topics and devices through which the presence effects are achieved.

Building presence

Before confronting the descriptions of the wartime firestorms, we need to assess the tools we can use to make sense of the scenes the authors offer us. The texts we will consider are not typologically homogeneous: some are objective accounts of situations that the writer encounters, others are fictional stories that unfold within an architectural scene. Despite these differences, however, the effect is that we, as readers, become present to the scenes. Our sense of presence, we could say, is articulated or built by the written text, which is capable of evoking memories and feelings.¹¹

Presence is one of the great philosophical conundrums, and many authors, especially phenomenologists, have struggled to define what it means 'to be present'.¹² Works of art – including literature – play a key role in articulating presence, somehow granting us deeper access to the world. Presence is not something that merely happens, but, as Alva Nöe notes, a condition that we must labour to achieve:

What is true of the experience of the work of art is true of human experience quite generally. The world shows up for us in experience only insofar as we know how to make contact with it, or, to use a different metaphor, only insofar as we are able to bring it into focus. One reason why art is so important to us is that it recapitulates this fundamental fact about our relation to the world around us: the world is blank and flat until we understand it.¹³

To gain access to the world, skilful engagement is required, and in the case of art both the author and the perceiver play a symmetrical role. The perceiver must contribute attitude and posture towards the phenomenon, lest he or she remains indifferent towards it; the creator's task is that of coming into contact with the viewer or reader. 'Contact' here means more than just a theoretical and aseptic subject-object relationship; instead it is a spatial, embodied form of touching. Borrowing an expression by Toni Morrison, literary critic Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes the phenomenon of presence as the paradoxical sensation of being touched as if from inside.¹⁴

Gumbrecht's seminal work on the 'presence effect' in literature is indeed key to understanding what it is about

the description of wartime destruction that touches us so intimately. In building his argument against the Western hermeneutic tradition, Gumbrecht makes it clear that even a text, which has no proper physical dimension, engages us spatially, in ways that are to some extent similar to pictures, music or even architectural ensembles, and that this effect of tangibility is in constant movement.¹⁵ In addressing Heidegger's concept of Being, and its relation to materiality, space and movement, Gumbrecht postulates a similarity to what he considers the ontological nature of presence. Yet the most acute point of synthesis is not presence itself, but rather the tension it establishes with meaning, that is, what makes things culturally specific.¹⁶

While conceptualisations of what it means to be present vary, many theories agree on the centrality of this concept. Closer to the architectural domain, German phenomenologist Gernot Böhme theorises that beyond the classic notions of Cartesian space and of Aristotelian place, what we must consider as the site of experience is what he terms 'the space of bodily presence'.¹⁷ Böhme's aesthetic model conceptualises space as a tripartite articulation between the material constitution of the world, the more-than-given established by atmospheres and situations, and the experiencing subject's bodily disposition (*Befindlichkeit*).¹⁸ Adverse to Nöe's position, which sees presence as a wilful condition that, once achieved, grants us deeper access to the experienced world, Böhme sees it rather as a prerequisite for any spatial interaction. The pre-reflective sphere is particularly animated by the stirrings produced by our body's resonance to the ambient environment.

We can note that presence is a question that crosses from art to architecture, from philosophy to literary criticism. What makes it relevant in contemporary thought is its ontological opposition to distance. While what Gumbrecht calls the hermeneutic field offers a conception where meaning is always concealed, and must be retrieved through an endless process of interpretation, presence acknowledges the fact that we are embedded within the world, and can directly witness and be affected by phenomena as they unfold, without the need for a code to decipher them.¹⁹

What remains a crucial question as we work across the reality of architectural space and its literary representation, is what these two phenomena ultimately have in common. I have argued that while a distance between actual reality and its description – no matter how accurate – is unavoidable, the two end up sharing something, which could allow the situation to become at least partially present.²⁰ As Kathleen Stewart notes, 'in a situation, things hanging in the air are worth describing. Theory becomes a descriptive method awkwardly approaching the thing that

is happening by attuning to it as a thing of promise and contact.²¹

What the accounts of wartime Germany offer us is a twofold take on lived space. The phenomena themselves – the raging fire, wastelands of rubble, razed cities – set the stage for the drama. But the attunement to the felt experiences, to what makes the spaces come alive, largely emerges from the human situations that the authors depict. These micrologies, concentrating on the small and petty details, on the astonished contemplation of destruction and on how the refugees cope with this grim reality, is what makes the atmosphere emerge. It is these ‘ordinary affects’ – again to quote Stewart’s technique of penetrating lived reality by focusing on the minutiae of life – that ultimately allow us to be touched ‘from the inside’ by the descriptions, accounts, and stories.²² It is the way the authors have to make us become *present*.

Scene 1: fragments of buildings, fragments of men

Heinrich Böll’s short story ‘Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We...’ tells of a wounded German soldier who, in the middle of the night, is carried on a stretcher into a school that has been transformed into a field hospital.²³ His wounds are so severe that he is tightly swaddled in a blanket and no longer feels his limbs. In the brief transport from the ambulance to an upper-floor classroom, he seems to recognize the decorations placed along the hallways, but reckons that all schools in Germany must be fitted with similar items, dictated by a rigid national regulation. Yet once he is laid down in the large drawing classroom, amid dozens of screaming wounded soldiers, he reads on the blackboard, in his own handwriting, the verses *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...*, which he had written there just shortly before being sent off to war. It is at this moment that he understands that he does indeed find himself in his old school building, in the art room where for eight years he had learned to copy Greek vases and practiced calligraphy. And with equal terror he realizes that the reason he can no longer feel his limbs is because the explosion has ripped them away from his body, leaving him as only the ‘fragment of a man’.

Böll’s story first appeared in 1950 in a collection with the same title. The writer, who had served as a soldier for six years, through this and the other stories in the collection reflects on the spaces and moods he had encountered during his wartime experience. Far from the Hollywood-inspired clichés of German soldiers as ruthless, robotic killing machines, the men portrayed by Böll are frail, shattered by the brutal events and by the common destiny of having been sent off to die by a criminal and psychotic ruling elite.

Böll skilfully depicts the characters in his stories with a few rapid strokes, hinting at their appearance, their ragged

clothing, their postures and their inner ruminations. The architectural settings where the action unfolds are also sketched beyond their physical articulation: the writer frequently introduces sensorial cues arising from foul smells, evoking the cheap tobacco smoked by the soldiers, the bad food served in the *Kneipe* (bar) where they occasionally gather to unwind, the mix of sweat, excrement and blood that infests the hideaways tucked amid crumbling buildings. Most stories take place at night, in the near-darkness of the anti-bombing blackouts or in the flickering light of dim lightbulbs.

There is a striking resonance between the individuals inhabiting Böll’s stories from this early collection and the architecture and urban places where they take place. The common feeling, among both men and buildings, is that unity has been lost: the organic solidarity and cohesion of the classic *corpus*, the overarching principle that binds the members of a body – be it physical or metaphorical – into a consistent whole, has been irreversibly shattered. The cities themselves are now in ruins – hence the general denomination of this period’s German literature, *Trümmerliteratur* – and are squatted, rather than inhabited, by the few who have remained after the Allied aerial bombing campaigns. The buildings are fractured, with hollow windows gaping onto deserted streets, collapsed roofs and the rare occasional sign of inhabitation amid ruin. The people, above all, are fragmented: broken bodies, with soldiers missing limbs, but also women whose men are dead, captive, or far away in some distant battle front. Social liaisons, the conventions structuring the social body, are fragmented too. Strikingly, even feelings seem disgregated, as these cannot always be recognised: as a group of soldiers visits a musky *Kneipe* and starts to drink, the narrator observes: ‘Only after the fourth or fifth glass would we start to talk. Beneath the exhausted rubble of our hearts, this miraculous potion awakened something strangely precious that our fathers might have called nostalgia.’²⁴ As the war has destroyed cities and buildings, has shattered bodies and spirits, even the certainty of feelings has been undermined, that which had allowed their fathers to conduct a stable and confident existence.

The same appears to happen with the architectural heritage. The school in Bendorf described in Böll’s story, the lofty institution adorned with the symbols of high classical culture (and of German racism), is no longer immediately recognisable to the narrator as the place where for eight years he had pursued his education. In the semi-darkness of the blackout, amid the whining and stench of wounded bodies, it turns into an uncanny space of alienation. The relationships between subjects and their habitat is broken, and heritage architecture is no longer capable of providing individuals their place in the world they inhabit.



Fig. 1: Dresden after the raids of 13 and 14 February 1945. Photo: © Deutsche Fotothek, unknown photographer.

Böll's celebrated oeuvre, which led him to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1972, is a thorough investigation of how the disaggregating forces unleashed by the war rippled through German society in the decades following the conflict. Each of his major novels addresses one particular manifestation of this phenomenon: *The Clown* (1963) is a social satire of the new values that emerged in the post-war years, as Germany was experiencing its rebirth and economic miracle; *Group Portrait with Lady* (1971) explores the aftermath of foreign occupation on German ground, and how it affected individuals and families; *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1974) describes the violence of political terrorism in the early 1970s.²⁵

As Böll's novels constantly refer to urban settings – shifting from one German city to another – the consequences of the war can also be ascertained in the ongoing reconstruction, especially in its shortcomings and cruelties. Writing in the same years as Böll, psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich identified in the collective history of Nazism the roots of a malaise affecting the generation born after Hitler's rise. The sense of guilt, disillusion, and trauma experienced in early youth led this generation, in Mitscherlich's view, to develop an 'inability to mourn', thus leaving them perpetually connected to the dramatic events of the war.²⁶ Even the planning practices of the reconstruction, Mitscherlich argues, prove the presence of the destructive forces that Böll traces in society, leading to a new, dehumanised and dissociated space, where the presumed rational and scientific principles of design altogether fail in nurturing the affective bonds between inhabitants and their environment.²⁷

Yet Böll's one novel that most poignantly epitomises the deep connection between architecture and history, its pregnancy as heritage embodying traditions as well as collective and individual destinies, is *Billiards at Half-past Nine* (1959).²⁸ Far from the agile, impressionistic style of Böll's early stories, here the dense and deeply symbolic narration recounts the story of the Fährmel family, a prominent lineage of architects in the western Rhein region, spanning three generations, two world wars and half a century of German history. As a young architect, Heinrich Fährmel unexpectedly wins the competition to design the abbey of St. Anton in Kissatal, a neo-Romanesque edifice whose sombre appearance elevates it to an austere symbol of religiosity. During World War II, however, the front runs through the Kissatal, and Heinrich's son Robert, who is a blaster in the German army, convinces his commander that the demolition of the abbey would have provided them with a crucial tactical advantage, liberating shooting lines towards the enemy's position. The building's fate is thus sealed, although Robert does not confess to his father his role in the abbey's destruction.

After the war, Robert's son Joseph, again an architect, is hired by the firm that has been assigned to rebuild St. Anton *à l'identique*. While engaged in reconstructing his grandfather's masterpiece, he discovers his father's involvement in the destruction of the building, thus closing a circle of making and undoing. The parable of the Fährmel family and of the abbey of St. Anton, the building that embodies its destiny, can be read as a larger metaphor of the fate of Germany during the first half of the twentieth century, and is equally tell-tale of what heritage stands for in society. While under normal conditions a monument can be considered the pivotal, stabilizing force for a community, as events begin to unravel, when the historical atmosphere – a collective mood experienced by society as a whole, modulating the people's corporeal dispositions – can shift from love and respect to hate, even leading to its destruction.²⁹ The sense of heritage itself becomes fragmented.

Scene 2: indifferent ruins

The Swedish journalist's Stig Dagerman's book *German Autumn* describes the cities destroyed by the Allied bombing campaigns. He chronicles some of the losses: in Cologne, the three bridges crossing the Rhine lie at the bottom of the river; Berlin's classical columns and friezes are shattered; Essen's once magnificent steelworks are now a hulking skeletal presence. He recounts how German citizens seem to take pride in living in the city that has been most bombarded. Hamburg, above all cities, strikes him for the extent of its destruction:

if you want to be an expert in ruins, if you would like to have a pattern-card showing everything a wiped-out city can offer by way of crumbling walls, if you would like to see not a city of ruins but a landscape of ruins drearier than the desert, wilder than the mountain-top and as far-fetched as a nightmare, there is still only one German city that will do, and that is Hamburg.³⁰

Travelling by train, Dagerman describes the devastated landscape as offering a unique array of ruins and rubble, as far as the eye can see: a sort of catalogue of the destruction produced by the Allied bombing of 'Operation Gomorrah,' as the Hamburg aerial campaign was codenamed. Yet beyond the lunar field of debris, what equally strikes the narrator is the apparent indifference of his fellow-passengers. There is a train line connecting two stations, a ride lasting a quarter of an hour: from the carriage windows not a single human being can be seen. But no one looks out, except the narrator and his guide:

The stranger betrays himself immediately through his interest in ruins. Becoming immune takes time, but it does happen. My guide became immune ages ago, but she has a purely personal



Fig. 2: View of the Eilbektal Park in Hamburg. Photo: © Imperial War Museum.

interest in the moonscape between Hasselbrook and Landwehr. She lived there for six years but has not seen it again since an April night in 1943 when the bombs rained over Hamburg.³¹

Descending from the train, the two travellers look for a building that once stood close to the stop, but it is nowhere to be found. In this area of the city, the bombs have spared the cellar roofs, and the basements now host hundreds of refugee families. Despite this grim situation, Dagerman sees children play among the rubble, laundry left to dry in the sun, the timid signs of domesticity and familiar life.

Dagerman's account of post-war Germany was published in Sweden in 1947. The young reporter, writing for the Danish newspaper *Expressen*, travelled through the country for several weeks, visiting many major cities and sending his reports to Denmark. His interest ranged widely: he records the state of devastation of the bombed cities and the dire conditions of life of the refugees who squatted among the ruins. He considers the ongoing – and in his eyes largely questionable – process of de-Nazification, with the hundreds of trials that followed Nuremberg, calling before the judges the smaller gears of the Nazi machine. He also ponders the slow and timid emergence of a renewed political life, with the parties competing to find their place among German voters.

While Dagerman's descriptions of the crippled cities are stunning, what is most striking is the keen observation of the exceptional spatial conditions afforded by the ruined landscapes, and the affect they produced in the inhabitants. The German population collectively suffered a trauma, and coming to terms with its aftermath was no simple undertaking. Most cities had been razed to the ground, a terrible punishment for the support that the population had largely granted to the Nazis over the previous decade. After all, the bombing campaign had been explicitly designed to destroy the morale of the enemy civilian population and, in particular, of the industrial workers.³² As a consequence, in the bombed-out cities shame was in the air: the collective, atmospherically experienced feeling of being punished for some wrongdoing, and the sometimes tacit acceptance that the destruction somehow had been deserved. Feelings like shame, as Tonino Griffero notes, are measured against a certain normativity, the definition of what has been established to be right or wrong, as the 'emotional and corporeal foundation of the whole social life (especially of the idea of duty).'³³ The embodied dynamic of shame – as Hermann Schmitz describes it, the sense of crawling into oneself without finding cover – lies at the root of Dagerman's observation of what happened on the train: all passengers – except himself – appeared indifferent to the tremendous devastation of Hamburg, possibly prompted to turn away by the sense of shame they were

collectively experiencing.³⁴ [Fig. 3]

The destruction, a colossal and unprecedented historical event, created a black hole in the collectively experienced atmosphere of post-war Germany. Before the war, the country's cities were a source of pride, embodying high culture and industriousness, the splendour of arts and the progress of technology. Yet the Allied bombing – a deliberate punishment, not a natural catastrophe like an earthquake – conversely transformed them into a source of shame, the very *monitus* against the wrong that had been done. What the German citizens had previously perceived as the buildings and spaces anchoring them to their traditions, identity, and values – the heritage architecture – had been warped into its exact opposite: the embodiment of all that had gone wrong under the Nazi regime. Perhaps no wonder then, as Sebald again observes, that the loss of this historical burden was ultimately regretted only by a few, while many others considered the destruction as an inevitable consequence of the Nazi warmongering.³⁵

The overall impression one derives from reading Dagerman's account, is that the Allied bombing campaign had produced a form of collective emotional paralysis, which resulted in a sense of apathy. The horror and devastation, Sebald argues, had been more than most were able to cope with, and this in his view also explains the emergence of that literary silence he analyses in *On the Natural History of Destruction*.³⁶

It is indeed striking how often Dagerman points to the indifference of the German people: indifference towards foreign occupation, the resumption of political debate, the grim conditions of life. Indifference appears even more frequently in Böll's work: the soldiers who face death every day, and spend their money to get drunk and depart their dire existential condition for a single night are indifferent; the women living in ruined buildings, waiting for their men to return from the front are indifferent. Schmitz describes this dynamic as follows:

This really is the case in emotional paralysis In the case of overwhelming catastrophes, which, like earthquakes, war time events or plane crashes, emotionally demand too much of an individual, he can become paralysed; the person looks down on his situation and, as though he were standing beside himself, nothing that happens moves him anymore. The affectedness is still experienced, but the person affected no longer becomes involved; his stance becomes detached.³⁷

There were millions of urban citizens affected by the bombings; many others came in contact with the survivors and were emotionally touched. As the trauma produced by the destruction passed from individual to individual, like a type of contagion, the emotions became shared, making



Fig. 3: A street in Hamburg after 1943. Photo: © Deutsche Fotothek / Germin.

the bodies of the population converge towards an affective state attuned to the catastrophe. These collectively experienced emotions and their power of attuning all those that are perceptually present in a given spatial field have been variously thematised, and what we can infer from Dagerman's accounts is the dense, leaden atmosphere that the autumn of 1946 afforded to both survivors and visitors.³⁸ It seems to have been felt as a transversal emotional paralysis, an embodied response to trauma that only a detached external observer such as the reporter himself could avert. Destroyed with the bombed cities was a significant part of their inhabitants' affective life.³⁹

Scene 3: Losing One's Way

Der Untergang is Hans Erich Nossack's vivid memoir of the bombing of Hamburg, which the author barely escaped since he had taken a short vacation and rented a small cabin fifteen kilometers south of the city.⁴⁰ From there, he could witness the gigantic fleet of bombers that unleashed an immense storm of fire over the city. His description of the nighttime aerial raids records the deep roar of thousands of airplane engines, the howl of the descending bombs and the rising flames that could well be seen even from a distance. The memoir continues with the description of the waves of shocked survivors flowing out of the city in the days following the raids, and finally with Nossack's return to Hamburg. Here, his words illustrate both the devastation suffered by the physical structure of the city, which has been entirely razed to the ground, and the stunned responses of the other people who dared to venture back into town. The memoir ends with Nossack's observation of the uncanny silence that has followed the destruction, which in his words seems to have deprived the city of its place in time.

Nossack's account of Hamburg's bombing was written only three months after the events, and first appeared in 1948. His work is among the few that Sebald recognises as a candid report of what happened to the German city in the summer of 1943.⁴¹ Nossack himself, on the opening page of *The End*, says he felt he had a mandate to render an account, as an ethical urge he could not set aside. The text, which the author claims was originally meant only as a form of self-therapy, immediately made Nossack famous, was translated into French and republished many times.⁴²

The account, unfolding over the course of a few days, is a detailed observation of the dynamics of destruction. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* fills the gaps of the paucity of reports with a technical description of the research and technology that the Allied forces implemented to destroy the Third Reich cities, thus reconstructing the events from a third-person perspective over half a century after they had taken place. On the other hand, Nossack was

deeply embedded within them, and writes on a surge of emotion from a purely first-person perspective.⁴³ His fear, reported in the essay's introduction, is that he would fall prey to denial and removal, as his fellow citizens seem to have done. *The End* is valuable because beyond returning a vivid and horrifying image of the destruction, the author is also constantly observing himself: his responses, emotions, movements, his sense of bedazzlement and confusion as he returns to Hamburg for the first time after the major raids.

We can follow Nossack as he explores the razed city, glimpses the bundles of corpses laid out along the street, feels the absence of that domestic life that had animated the houses – no more smell of cake on Sunday coming from the windows – and on the contrary contracts to the foul stench oozing from the cellars where countless people have been burned to death and are now being consumed by maggots. The atmosphere of horror and decay is largely transported by the smells, and, as he notes, 'A sudden craving for perfume arose in us.'⁴⁴ [Fig. 5]

Stunning in Nossack's description – and in many others as well – is the city's total loss of structure. Everything has been turned upside-down: where houses once stood, one now only finds piles of rubble; the survivors no longer inhabit the houses, since they have moved underground to the basements, the only shelters still left standing; the streets and alleys of the historic urban fabric have solidified into a continuous, lunar landscape of broken architectural fragments. Nossack is surprised to see some of the city's towers still standing, lone surviving landmarks in an urban landscape that has lost all verticality.⁴⁵

While human life slowly adapts to the emergency conditions, with families squatting in flooded basements and children scavenging among ruins for any usable material, we can grasp the sense of disorientation that these spatial conditions afford. Cities are human habitats, and normally offer their inhabitants spaces that feel safe, controllable, where one can find one's way by navigating through the streets guided by familiar objects and landmarks. Performing these spatial rituals each day, we learn to use our city even in a distracted disposition. But when this spatial structure collapses, when the space we once knew no longer helps us know where we are, another function of the heritage value of cities ceases to be. Heritage architecture – the familiar spatial array of one's hometown and neighbourhood, beyond their possible monumental relevance – at once supports one in knowing both where one is and who one is, fuelling individuals' and communities' sense of identity. Once it is destroyed, each movement and each step require new intentional labour, and many desperate survivors in the post-war reports appear to be burdened by this fatigue.

In the English edition of Nossack's account, the text is



Fig. 4: The Ringstraße in Dresden after 1945. Photo: © Deutsche Fotothek / Richard Petersen.

complemented by a set of photographs by Erich Andres, who served as a propaganda photographer in the army. While on leave in Dresden in 1943, he secretly photographed the destroyed city, the charred corpses in the streets, the crowds of seemingly indifferent passers-by finding their way through the rubble covering a space that has lost nearly all structure. The subjects' postures, gestures and facial expressions clearly speak of a gruelling existential state, burdened by hardship and a collective sense of failure, but also the urge to survive in the face of adverse conditions. As life adapts to this challenging state of things, the crowds start carving new paths amid the rubble of what was once Dresden. From these new tracks, the future urban life will one day emerge.

Conclusion: the time of ruins

In the preface to a book of photographs published in 1965 – the vicennial of the war's end – Heinrich Böll reflected on the effects of the reconstruction of Cologne.⁴⁶ On some pages, photographer Walter Dick pairs images of the ruins and the population inhabiting it with views of the reconstructed city, inviting the reader to reflect on the social transformation that the miraculous post-war renaissance had produced, and on the new urban atmosphere that had emerged from this process.

Twenty years after *The End*, the rubble was gone, the country was at the height of its economic rebirth, and the cities had been partially rebuilt – although not everyone was satisfied with the results.⁴⁷ The urban atmosphere had changed: thriving commercial cores rose where twenty years earlier everything had been destroyed, and the bridges again connected the two shores of the Rhine. Yet what the book implicitly seems to claim is that the distance between the two historical moments, between the dramatic situation of the war's aftermath and the optimistic city of 1965 was somehow shorter than one would expect. Something of the atmosphere, of the shared emotions caused by the destruction still lingered, perhaps inscribed in the lived memories of the survivors' bodies, those who had been there during the nocturnal raids. If in 1965 they could feel proud of the German people's resilience and ability to stand again, the trauma of the war had not altogether disappeared.

Eight decades later, the traces of destruction are no longer visible, except in those places where it has been memorialised. The contemporary German cities, which have returned to being spaces of life for their inhabitants, have been domesticated and once again constitute places of heritage, which citizens recognise as their own. This new form of heritage inevitably embodies the destruction, the events that unmade and then remade space. Although the Allied bombings may today seem at a sidereal distance, they are

indeed still somehow present, as a spatialised, affective resonance.

Exactly for this reason, I believe, the literary accounts I have reviewed acquire a special role in our culture. It is telling that the German debate sparked by Sebald's essay arrived more than half a century after the bombings, when the material traces of the destruction and the lived memory of the events have almost entirely faded. When the unbelievable violence and senseless destruction start losing their sense of reality, and one may even wonder if those events really took place, then it is the role of literature, more than of space, to preserve the vitality of events over time. While I believe that urban space bears a unique heritage of human events and memories, literary space is the one cultural artifact that can preserve and make ever present an aspect of life that is 'touched from the inside'. For this reason, even today, when eyewitnesses of the events are dwindling in number, can we somehow imagine that the destruction is still going on, in the pages of the books entrusted to us.

In the endless cycle of destruction and reconstruction, today other cities continue to fall, devastated by earthquakes or wars. Just as the literary accounts that tell the story of the German destructions are endowed with the ability to make the events ever present, touching us and bringing us into contact with the deeper stratum of space, we may expect a future literature recounting the events that are causing the emergence of these new ruins. Viewed in perspective, against the backdrop of disasters that we witness in real time, this literature may also help open our eyes to what we experience today, to the way the heritage of cities is warped by the war, and to how we can envisage its future.



Fig. 5: Corpses of men deceased in the firestorm, 1943. Photo: © Deutsche Fotothek / Erich Andres.

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Notes

1. Robert E. L. Faris, *Mental Disorders in Urban Areas: An Ecological Study of Schizophrenia and Other Psychoses* (New York: Hafner, 1939); Alexander Mitscherlich, *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965); Federico De Matteis, 'Fear of Spaces, Spaces of Fear: Anxiety, Agoraphobia and Other Urban Affects', in *The Affective City 1*, ed. Stefano Catucci and Federico De Matteis (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2021), 274–95.
2. Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 77–78.
3. Council of Europe, 'Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society', 2005, <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>.
4. See Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2010), particularly part I. In this influential book, Smith challenges what she calls the 'authorised discourse' on heritage, which in her reconstruction has been building up and consolidating primarily in Europe since the Enlightenment and takes the material dimension of the grand monument as its fundamental paradigm. Contrary to this, she writes: 'Heritage is a multilayered performance – be this a performance of visiting, managing, interpretation or conservation – that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present. Simultaneously the heritage performance will also constitute and validate the very idea of "heritage" that frames and defines these performances in the first place'. Ibid., 3.
5. Martin Coward, *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* (London: Routledge, 2009).
6. See, among others, Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Federico De Matteis, 'Ancient City of the Future: Notes on the Reconstruction of Beirut', in *Historic Cities in the Face of Disasters*, ed. Fatemeh Farnaz Arefian et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 335–52; Ammar Azzouz, *Domicide: Architecture, War and the Destruction of Home in Syria* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023).
7. W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2004 [1999]).
8. Ibid., 94.
9. Sebald's position was criticised by several authors who offered

various counter-arguments, among them Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945* (Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002); Volker Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung: die Literaten und der Luftkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008); and, more recently, David F. Crew, *Bodies and Ruins: Imagining the Bombing of Germany, 1945 to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

10. First published with other short stories in Hans Erich Nossack, *Interview mit dem Tode* (Berlin: Krüger, 1948); later as *Der Untergang* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961); English edition, *The End: Hamburg 1943*, trans. Joel Agee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
11. Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: A Scriptive Approach to the Experience, Use, and Imagination of Place* (Delft: TU Delft Library, 2012), 45.
12. 'Presence' is a key concept in early phenomenology, as well documented in Husserl's work on *Anwesenheit* and intentionality, which was influenced by Brentano, Bergson and James; see: Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964). Central to the phenomenological tradition is Heidegger's conceptualisation of *Dasein* in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), §5. This further inspired Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily presence, as postulated in *Phenomenology of Perception*, especially part I. A more recent, fundamental contribution in this sense is Hermann Schmitz's New Phenomenology, illustrated in Hermann Schmitz, *Der Leib* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2011). For a review of notions of presence, see Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (London: Routledge, 2008), especially chapters 3 and 6.
13. Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2.
14. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 4.
15. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 17.
16. Ibid., 77.
17. Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 86.
18. Ibid., 90.
19. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 28.
20. Federico De Matteis et al., 'Phenomenographies: Describing the Plurality of Atmospheric Worlds', *Ambiances* 5 (2019): 1–22.
21. Kathleen Stewart, 'Atmospheric Attunements', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3 (2011): 447.
22. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

23. Heinrich Böll, *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa* (Opladen: Middelhaue, 1950); the English edition was first published in 1966, *Heinrich Böll: The Collected Stories*, trans. Leila Vennewitz and Breon Mitchell (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011).
24. *Ibid.*, 97.
25. Heinrich Böll, *The Clown*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Penguin Books, 1994 [1963]); *Group Portrait with Lady*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Penguin Books, 1994 [1971]); *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum oder wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1974); English edition, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).
26. Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (Munich: Piper, 1977).
27. Mitscherlich, *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte*, 39.
28. Heinrich Böll, *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*, trans. Patrick Bowles (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962 [1959]).
29. Schmitz, *Der Leib*, 116.
30. Stig Dagerman, *German Autumn*, trans. Robin Fulton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011 [1947]), 20.
31. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
32. Sebald, *Natural History of Destruction*, 17.
33. Tonino Griffero, *Quasi-Things* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 48.
34. Schmitz, *Der Leib*, 18; Sebald, *Natural History of Destruction*, 30.
35. *Ibid.*, 13.
36. *Ibid.*, 30.
37. Hermann Schmitz, *New Phenomenology: A Brief Introduction* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2019), 129.
38. The spatial character of emotions, and their ability to affect groups and communities is transversally addressed in several research fields. Among some of the declinations more relevant in terms of spatial effects, see the concepts of affective atmosphere: Ben Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 77–81; Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); *atmosphere*: Tonino Griffero, 'Felt-Bodily Communication: A Neophenomenological Approach to Embodied Affects', *Studi di Estetica* 45, no. 2 (2017): 71–86; Tonino Griffero, *The Atmospheric 'We': Moods and Collective Feelings* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2021); *shared emotions*: Dylan Trigg, 'The Role of Atmosphere in Shared Emotion', *Emotion, Space and Society* 35 (2020): 1–7; Dylan Trigg, ed., *Atmospheres and Shared Emotions* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022); *resonance*: Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World* (Medford: Polity Press, 2019); *collective feelings*: Hilge Landweer, 'The Spatial Character of Atmospheres: Being-Affected and Corporeal Interactions in the Context of Collective Feeling', *Studi di Estetica* 47, no. 14 (2019): 153–68; *interaffectivity*: Thomas Fuchs and Sabine C. Koch, 'Embodied Affectivity: On Moving and Being Moved', *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 1–12; Thomas Fuchs, 'Intercorporeality and Interaffectivity', *Phenomenology and Mind*, no. 11 (2016): 194–209; as well as Hermann Schmitz's embodiment theory: Schmitz, *Der Leib*; Hermann Schmitz, 'The Felt Body and Embodied Communication', *Yearbook for Eastern and Western Philosophy* 2017, no. 2 (2017): 9–19.
39. Thomas Fuchs and Jann E. Schlimme, 'Embodiment and Psychopathology: A Phenomenological Perspective', *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 22, no. 6 (2009): 570–75.
40. Nossack, *The End*,
41. Sebald, *Natural History of Destruction*, 11.
42. Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, 26.
43. After the publication of Sebald's essay in 1999, a debate concerning the veracity of his interpretation broke out in Germany, since not all scholars agreed about the existence of this literary 'black hole.' In particular, a counterclaim was that while there are actually abundant reports of the destruction, it is the public who refuses to accept these works, in a form of denial comparable to the sense of indifference towards the ruined cities reported by Dagerman. See Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung*.
44. Nossack, *The End*, 45.
45. *Ibid.*, 39.
46. Walter Dick and Heinrich Böll, *Zeit der Ruinen: Köln am Ende der Diktatur* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1965).
47. Michael Braum and Ursula Baus, eds., *Rekonstruktion in Deutschland: Positionen zu einem umstrittenen Thema* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009).

Biography

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